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ABSTRACT

Small schools may resist educational reform because they view the implementation of change as too costly and time consuming. Formation of a consortium of small schools allows the pooling of staff and resources, thereby increasing capabilities while maintaining the positive attributes of small schools. In rural northeastern Oregon, eight small school districts formed a consortium to implement state-mandated changes toward a goal-based curriculum. Initially, many area teachers were skeptical about both the reform effort and the consortium. A council composed of representatives from each district and the local college received training in curriculum development, program implementation, and related matters and disseminated the information to their member districts. Teachers in each discipline worked in curriculum study groups to develop curriculum guides that blended traditional content with the outcomes-based and process-oriented goals of the statewide program. These work groups met monthly for 1 year, with college credit available to participants. Working together sparked excitement for innovative teaching practices and improved teachers' self-esteem and sense of empowerment. Continued collaboration and peer mentoring contributed to the successful implementation of the curriculum projects. Districts that were highly committed to the consortium in terms of financial support and personnel showed the greatest implementation of change. (SV)

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FORMING CONSORTIA:

A PROMISING APPROACH TO RESTRUCTURING IN THE SMALL SCHOOL

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Small schools hesitate to embrace the restructuring movement. Many have practiced a form of collaborative management and curriculum integration as a matter of survival for a long time. They negotiate daily between the conflict of their desire to provide the best educational program possible, their limited resources and professional isolation. Too often these schools hold so strongly to the belief that they are doing "the new thing", they fail to fully envelope the paradigm shift toward high productivity, information processing programs. Such a focus requires a rethinking and reorganization of the decision making processes of the school, as well as the instructional programs. Formation of a consortia with other small schools can increase time and resources available for planning and implementing needed changes.

Melnick (1986), in a comparative study of the relationship between district size and indicators of educational quality, found significant differences between the numbers of course offerings in small, medium, and large high schools. Understandably, large high schools are able to offer many more course selections. A higher percentage of students attend college from large school districts than from small districts which suggests that this limited curricular experience may create self-imposed career limitations or a limiting of students' ability to adapt to new situations. In light of this country's need for a well educated citizenry; an appropriate education, regardless of size of school, requires that small schools restructure toward their programs. Small schools must look for creative ways to accommodate students with varying backgrounds, needs, and aspirations. A consortium of small districts can share courses of study and special programs, as well as purchasing power for technical assistance and staff development, increasing their capabilities while maintaining the positive attributes of a small school.

To change a teaching and learning paradigm, educators' require time for talking, debating, comparing/contrasting, and experimenting if districts truly desire to implement the programs they believe to be most productive. Consorting with other districts allow ssmall schools to pool their resources and strengths, increasing their purchasing and human resource power. Faculty members with special talents may be shared as staff developers or teachers.

Why Form a Consortium?

Two important characteristics of small schools, the limited number of staff and the distance from technical assistance personnel, makes time for learning, talking, and debating about change difficult to arrange. This activity is too often seen as non-productive and time is costly. Dunne and Carlson (1981) clearly described the situation most effectively when they stated:

> High schools of 150 find it inconvenient to simultaneously teach every student, rewrite the English curriculum, negotiate teacher contracts and produce a winning basketball team.

Smith (1983) reported that of 64 items referred to as "challenges" for the small school superintendent; financial support, curriculum improvement, and inservice training were the three greatest. All directly influence restructuring efforts and the implementation of change. A group of districts can afford to employ support staff (e.g. curriculum specialist, staff development specialist, change agent, etc.) to help with local concerns and to facilitate the implementation of change when concerns and needs are shared.

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The Consortium at Work

To begin a consortium, the districts must consider the details of management (e.g. what kind of assistance is being sought, who will manage the contract, who will serve as fiscal agent, who will supervise/evaluate, etc.). All arrangements need to be written and agreed upon. Jack Stoops, of Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (1992) has produced a handbook entitled Handbook II: The Use of Consortia to Engage in Curriculum Renewal for Small, Rural Schools. This handbook describes the attributes of successful consortium and development of necessary agreements between member districts. A successful consortium requires a fiscal commitment from the constituent districts. Grant money may be an excellent resource for assisting the beginning of a consortium , but solid fiscal commitment (through whatever formula is acceptable to the members) is a requirement that provides assured support and involvement.

From 1989-92 I worked in and studied a small schools consortium in rural northeastern Oregon. The consortium was comprised of eight districts who were focused primarily on the implementation of a goal-based curriculum program that was being implemented statewide. They desired assistance with curriculum change and staff development that would support a change from a very traditional topical orientation in discrete subjects to a more integrated approach through pervasive themes and concepts.

These districts prided themselves on their history and uniqueness. The people of the region, in general, are very independent and self reliant and desire no undo influence from the "more urban" state capital than absolutely necessary. Each district was very concerned about maintaining their own identity and producing written curriculum that supported their own teacher's special talents and community's values. Many administrators and teachers were concerned that the variance of educational philosophy, materials adoptions, and special programs between districts would make the consortium project too difficult. Teachers were extremely frustrated, angry and very skeptical about this reform effort. They were convinced that if they balked long enough this goal-based curriculum mandate would disappear. Classroom teachers saw this as one more imposition required by "the state" that didn't make sense and would require them to prepare long reports of useless data. While administrators were ready to "try anything" to get the process rolling, the teachers were not convinced "anything" would be of much help. The success of this enterprise came through the hearing of and attention to the concerns, while listening to their desires and forming those into the expected outcomes.

The Consortium was advised by a council composed of representatives from each district (i.e., teachers, principals, and superintendents), as well as a representative from the college that served the area. The mission of the Council was to seek information that would help member districts facilitate the restructuring project in their own district and to keep me (the curriculum and staff development specialist for the consortium) in the reality of their needs and wants, but meet compliance expectations of the state educational agency. Professional development was arranged to increase the Council's knowledge of the goals written in each discipline, the changing culture of their schools, alternative assessment, distance learning, how to facilitate special programs (i.e., music, art), etc. The Council served an essential role in the success of this consortium through their passage of information to administrators and teachers. Members became change agents in their district and were active distributors of information. All professional development for the Council was opened to anyone who wished to attend.

The greatest portion of the early work in each discipline was by teachers who worked in curriculum study groups (e.g., science, language arts, etc.). These groups focused on the development of a curriculum guide that blended the traditional content and topics with the more outcomes-based and process-oriented goals of the statewide program. (While the documents that were produced were impressive, it was essential that they be discussed as "working drafts" of documents.) These groups worked in addition to the Council, although it was not unusual for Council members to also be curriculum study group members. None of the districts had a written curriculum and no one in the region

understood how the statewide goals affected classroom teachers, or how they had originated. Because of the consortium, all grade levels and courses were represented at curriculum study meetings, thus limiting the professional isolation that would have occurred if single districts had conducted the project alone. As can be imagined, the first meeting of each study group required time for expression of frustration over what was perceived as an insurmountable task related to a poorly understood statewide project, given to them by an agency perceived to not understand the plight of the small school.

After the above discussion, a meaningful presentation/discussion about the educational paradigm shift was useful. After this presentation, a written curriculum grew from a hard look at appropriate teaching strategies, integration of content topics, alternative assessments, and outcomes for students. These work sessions occurred monthly over the course of a year, with college credit available to those participants meeting the expected work outcomes for the project.

What consistently emerged from the curriculum study projects was the genuine care and concern, as well as the excitement for innovative teaching practices described by colleagues, as well as a working curriculum document. (Teachers are always interested in a great instructional idea.) Working together provided instant positive feedback to the curriculum study group member in the form of new ideas and materials (trades between teachers) and professional appreciation shown by their peers for their innovative ideas. This part of the process facilitated an improvement of teacher self esteem and empowerment.

The Consortium at Change Implementation

Adopting an innovation is the easy part of change. People are full of enthusiasm about the promise of what's to come. However, adoption seldom means implementation and the enthusiasm soon wanes when efforts and focus are quickly directed to another issue. Implementation requires a well choreographed plan for the expectations to become reality. (How many times have you heard the ever popular reference to "pendulum swings"?) Professional development and time to coordinate is essential. It is necessary for administrators to be knowledgeable of the innovation and actively support its implementation by their faculty.

In the consortium described above, the focus was on curriculum restructuring. The curriculum study group members played an essential role as describers of need in their district and disseminators of information. They prepared a plan for the implementation of the goal-based curriculum guides in their district, made recommendations regarding needed professional development, technical assistance, materials, etc. Where similarities were common, inservice training days were targeted for professional development activities. Where assistance was unique to a single or few districts, individual school calendars were consulted.

When teachers and administrators were asked to respond to a program evaluation survey (McGrew, 1992) related to the perceived success of the curriculum restructuring consortium, outcomes were as followed:

1. Having information was empowerment and professionalism. Knowledge and understanding of the project was essential for the faculty to consider the project valuable, practical, or beneficial. The time for learning and discussing, while difficult to schedule, was crucial to success. By working with neighboring districts, teachers felt that they were able to accomplish more and higher quality work than they could working alone. They expressed a willingness to collaborate with each other when they understood what the project/innovation was about and what it meant to them.
2. Cooperation and the professional support of all members of the organization was essential to the success of the consortium project. Teachers expressed concern that their administrators be well educated about the innovation so that they would understand how to support the implementation. Planning time for teachers working

together and the opportunity to mentor each other contributed to successful implementation of the curriculum projects.

3. Districts with a high degree of commitment to the project attended professional development activities more frequently and in greater numbers, as well as recommended future joint ventures in staff development between consortium districts. The high commitment districts showed the greatest degree of implementation of the change. A high degree of commitment was defined as fiscal support of the consortium, personnel support, participation of the administrator and teachers in professional development activities, and the desire by the administrator to learn about how to facilitate the project in their own district.

Through our own growth and learning as professional educators, we model the spirit of life-long learning for students and colleagues. Through our own collaborative efforts, we develop and model cooperation. Enthusiasm and excitement for learning is contagious.

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